Gen. Odom blames leaks for 'deadly' intelligence loss

By Norman Black
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The head of the nation's communications intelligence agency said yesterday that his operations have been harmed more by news leaks in the past several years than at any point in history.

Army Lt. Gen. William E. Odom, director of the National Security Agency, said the United States had suffered "just deadly losses" in keeping tabs on Libya through electronic means because of news reports. He also cited a loss involving intelligence from Syria.

Gen. Odom refused to elaborate his claims, saying: "You just have to take my word that that's the way it looks from where we sit."

He said he had become so concerned about news leaks since assuming his post in 1985 that he had referred several cases to the Justice Department for prosecution under a 1950 statute that bars disclosure of "communications intelligence."

Although the Justice Department has yet to pursue such a case, he said, "I don't think that the application of the statute would greatly harm the flow of information and the public debate."

Gen. Odom, in a rare meeting with Pentagon correspondents, also expressed concern about the public debate that would accompany the negotiation of any arms accord with the Soviet Union.

Unless the portion of that debate focusing on verification procedures is shielded from the public by the Senate, much of the NSA's ability to verify Soviet compliance will be compromised, he said.

Gen. Odom predicted that the Soviet Union's recent emphasis on deploying mobile nuclear missiles would continue because the Soviet military is pursuing a doctrine that calls for the ability to hide its forces in order to fight a protracted war.

The NSA, based at Fort Meade, Md., is considered the largest and most secretive of American intelligence operations. It uses spy satellites and high-tech electronic listening gear and computers to eavesdrop on radio, telephone and other communication systems around the world.

"It is just the case, from where I sit, that leaks have damaged the signals intelligence system more seriously in the past three or four years than in a long, long time," Gen. Odom said.

Asked to provide examples, Gen. Odom said he didn't want "to get more specific right now and compound the things, but a number of sources have dried up in some areas, which you're all familiar with, in the past year or two."

"A number of years ago there was a case that had to do with a Damascus communication ... It was a leak. It attributed this thing to an intercept. And the source dried up immediately," Gen. Odom said.

Asked then about Libya, he replied: "Libya, sure. Just deadly losses."

Reagan administration officials disclosed in early 1986 that the United States was certain Libya was behind the bombing of a West Berlin nightclub because Libyan diplomatic messages had been intercepted and decoded.

It was unclear, however, whether Gen. Odom was referring to that disclosure, and he refused to elaborate.

Gen. Odom suggested that reporters could help safeguard national security by leaving out of their stories revelations about how intelligence information had been gathered, focusing instead on the information itself.

"That's where a lot of the damage comes," he said.

As for the case of Clayton J. Lonetree, the U.S. Embassy guard in Moscow who was convicted last month of passing secrets to Soviet agents, Gen. Odom said he still had "to assume the worst."

Lonetree was first charged with allowing Soviet agents inside the embassy building. Those charges were dropped for lack of evidence, and Gen. Odom agreed there was no "unambiguous evidence that they penetrated all the secure areas [inside the building]."

"But I can assure you the Soviet capabilities are such that a few minutes or an hour or two of physical access even into the adjoining areas would be quite damaging," he said.

"We've had some pretty open evidence of Soviet activities of this sort," Gen. Odom said. "It would be highly imprudent to conclude anything else."

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